

Myanmar ferry sinks in bad weather

50 feared dead
REUTERS, Yangon

About 50 people were believed to have drowned off Myanmar when a ferry sank in bad weather, government officials said on Saturday, though residents said they believed more people on the overcrowded vessel had died.

The boat had 209 people on board when it ran into high seas late on Friday on a voyage from the coastal town of Taunggok to Sittwe, capital of the west coast state of Rakhine, officials said.

"Twenty bodies have been found while 27 are still missing. Rescue workers are looking for them," Pyay Nyein, a senior official from the Inland Water Transport Department, told Reuters.

A Ministry of Transport official said the boat was swamped by huge waves and 167 people had been saved, though the missing were believed to be dead.

Residents in Taunggok, from where the boat embarked, said they believed the toll was higher as the ferry, which they identified as the government-owned Aung Tagun-3, would have been crowded with many unregistered passengers.

Marine accidents are common in Myanmar where many people have to rely on small, crowded and old boats for transport.

Modi visits Tamil heartland

Says world's engagement with India at 'new level'

AGENCIES

Narendra Modi visited Jaffna yesterday, making a highly symbolic first trip by an Indian prime minister to Sri Lanka's war-ravaged northern Tamil heartland after urging greater autonomy for the island's largest minority.

The Jaffna peninsula in Sri Lanka's far north was worst hit by the country's 37-year civil war that killed at least 100,000 people, mostly Tamils, and remains heavily militarised.

Officially, Modi was there to launch construction of a cultural centre funded by India and formally hand over thousands of houses to families made destitute by decades of war.

But his visit was also a demonstration of regional superpower India's support for Sri Lanka's Tamils, who share close cultural and religious ties with those in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

On Friday he held talks with Sri Lanka's new President Maithripala Sirisena and urged the government to fully implement a 1987 constitutional provision giving Tamils greater autonomy in the majority-Sinhalese nation.

India has long supported greater autonomy for the minority group, but Tamil leaders said Modi's comments



MODI'S LANDMARK SRI LANKA TOUR

were particularly strong.

Modi is only the second foreign leader to travel to Jaffna after British Prime Minister David Cameron, who travelled there during a Commonwealth summit in Colombo in November 2013.

Sirisena came to power in January promising ethnic reconciliation and accountability for alleged war crimes committed by security forces under the command of former leader Mahinda Rajapakse.

The United Nations has said it is

encouraged by his government's commitment to ethnic reconciliation and accountability for the alleged atrocities committed in the final stages of the war that ended in May 2009.

Hundreds of Tamils are believed to be in custody without trial, while the military still occupies large amounts of land belonging to Tamils.

Modi, who called Sri Lanka a "paradise on earth" during a banquet Sirisena hosted on Friday night, was to return to Delhi yesterday after a two-day visit to the Indian Ocean island.

On Friday he pledged \$1.81 billion in financial assistance to Sri Lanka, which had turned to China for economic aid under former strongman Rajapakse's decade-long rule.

Modi has said global confidence in India has been restored and the world's engagement with the country is at a "new level" even as he assured Sri Lanka that steps would be taken to address its concerns over the huge bilateral trade imbalance.

The Indian premier, who has made clear his ambition to reassert India's dominance in its own backyard since taking office less than a year ago, also called for greater security cooperation between Indian Ocean nations.

Strong Cyclone Pam devastates Vanuatu

Dozens feared killed

AFP, Suva

A terrifying tropical cyclone which smashed into Vanuatu in the South Pacific wreaked widespread devastation, aid agencies said yesterday, raising fears that dozens may have died in what may be one of the region's worst weather disasters.

The full extent of the damage is unknown, with limited communications in place after Super Cyclone Pam, a maximum category five storm, slammed directly into the island country late Friday with gusts up to 320 kilometres an hour.

The UN had unconfirmed reports of 44 people killed in one province, and said late Saturday that there was no clear number of deaths or injuries but that the impact of the cyclone had been "catastrophic".

Aid agencies were scrambling for information and preparing to send teams to Vanuatu -- with a UN disaster assessment and coordination team expected to arrive late today.

"While it is too early to say for certain, early reports are indicating that this weather disaster could potentially be one of the worst in Pacific history," UNICEF New Zealand's executive director Vivien Maidaborn said in a statement.

Residents of Port Vila spent the night hunkering down as the terrifying storm raged, waking to find trees had been uprooted, homes destroyed and areas flooded.

The storm crossed the main Vanuatu island, home to more than 65,000 people, and a group of islands further south where 33,000 live after affecting the Solomon Islands and Tuvalu, where there were no reports of fatalities.

Fiji Weather Service meteorologist Neville Koop said the cyclone was weakening as it slowly moved away from Vanuatu, and would pass between Fiji and New Caledonia before brushing the North Island of New Zealand on Monday.



US does not want Syrian regime collapse

Says CIA chief

AFP, New York

CIA Director John Brennan said Friday the United States does not want to see a chaotic collapse of the Syrian regime as it could open the way to Islamist extremists taking power.

The spy agency chief said Washington had reason to worry about who might replace President Bashar al-Assad if his government fell, given the rise of the Islamic State group and other jihadist in Syria.

"I think that's a legitimate concern," Brennan said when asked if the US government feared who might succeed Assad.

Speaking at an event at the Council on Foreign Relations, he said that "extremist elements" including the ISIS group and al-Qaeda veterans are "ascendant right now" in some parts of Syria.

"The last thing we want to do is allow them to march into Damascus."

"That's why it's important to bolster those forces within the Syrian opposition that are not extremists," Brennan said.

The US military is funding the training and arming of "moderate" Syrian rebel forces but the effort is only now getting off the ground.

Washington's stance is that Assad should have no role in Syria's future but President Barack Obama's administration and other governments wanted to see a political solution that would ensure a representative government, he said.

"None of us, Russia, the United States, coalition, and regional states, wants to see a collapse of the government and political institutions in Damascus," Brennan said.

Interviewed before a live audience by PBS television journalist Charlie Rose, the CIA chief also described the viral nature of the threat posed by the Islamic State group, saying it represented a change from previous terror organizations.

NEWS IN brief

Lakhvi to remain in jail

TNN, Islamabad/new Delhi

A defence lawyer yesterday said Pakistan has again detained LeT terrorist and Mumbai attack mastermind Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi for one month after a court ordered his release. Lakhvi is one of seven suspects who are being tried by Pakistan in connection with the attacks, which killed 166 people and seriously damaged relations between Pakistan and India.

Egypt plans to build new capital

AFP, Sharm El Sheikh

Egypt plans to build a new administrative and business capital east of Cairo that will house five million people and feature a theme park "four times bigger than Disneyland", a minister announced at a global investor conference.

Elderly nun gang-raped in West Bengal

THE HINDU ONLINE

A group of miscreants allegedly gang-raped a nun at a convent school in Ranaghat, in West Bengal's Nadia district, police said yesterday. According to the district police, the incident occurred inside a school Convent of Jesus and Mary in the early hours of yesterday. About a dozen dacoits forced themselves inside the institution and gang-raped the elderly nun when she tried to resist them. The incident evoked strong reactions across the State.

Swine flu kills 4 in Mumbai

TNN, Mumbai

Even as Indian and US scientists spar over genetic alterations in the H1N1 virus and its enhanced virulence, the city reported four deaths on Thursday, the highest in a single day. Between Thursday and Friday, as many as 70 people have tested positive for the disease. The total number of people confirmed with swine flu in the city is now 1,072.

Not sure about Iran deal

Says Kerry, reasserts US commitment of two-state solution

REUTERS, Sharm El-sheikh

On the eve of fresh talks with Iran, US Secretary of State John Kerry said it was unclear whether an interim agreement over its nuclear power program was within reach.

"I can't tell you whether or not we can get a deal, whether we are close," Kerry told a news conference yesterday in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, where he attended an Egyptian investment summit.

"The purpose of these negotiations is not just to get a deal, it is to get the right deal," he added.

The United States and five other major powers -- Britain, Germany, France, China and Russia -- will resume negotiations with Iran in Lausanne, Switzerland, from today. They hope to clinch a framework agreement by the end of the month.

The two sides would then seek to negotiate by June 30 a final agreement to would curb Iran's most sensitive nuclear activities for at least 10 years. In exchange, sanctions on the

Islamic Republic would gradually end.

Kerry expressed concern again that a letter to Iran last week from Republican senators may have undermined the talks. The letter warned Iran that any deal made by President Barack Obama might last only as long as he remained in office -- a highly unusual intervention in US foreign policy-making.

Kerry said he would assure Iranian negotiators and European allies during the upcoming talks that Congress did not have the authority to change the deal.

"As far as we're concerned, Congress has no ability to change an executive agreement," Kerry said, adding that "important gaps" still remained between the sides.

The letter followed a speech to Congress earlier this month by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who warned that Obama was negotiating a "bad deal" with Iran. Republicans invited Netanyahu to speak about Iran without consulting the White House or Democrats.



Police knock at Rahul's door

Congress accuses Modi govt of political spying

THE HINDU ONLINE

A day after a Delhi policeman visited Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi's Tughlak Road residence to make enquiries, the party attempted to corner the Central government demanding that Prime Minister Narendra Modi answer for the episode.

The Congress alleged political espionage by the Delhi Police. While the police termed it a "safety audit", Congress spokesperson Abhishek Singhvi described it as "unwarranted and weird enquiries".

Singhvi said: "This kind of snooping, surveillance and intrusion in a political opponent's life may be the Gujarat model but it's not the Indian model."

Meanwhile, the Delhi Police struggled to maintain that it was a routine security audit.

Rahul is an SPG protectee and already enjoys 24x7 cover from the elite security unit.

Delhi Police Commissioner BS Bassi told reporters that the enquiries were part of law and order arrangements and far from being mala fide.

The Commissioner stuck to his version of the episode, terming it a primary police duty aimed at gauging and quelling threats to "significant personalities".

Police sources told The Hindu that the episode consisted of a "lower functionary" from the Tughlak Road police station "carrying out orders".

The official concerned -- an ASI -- reached Mr. Gandhi's residence on Friday with a bona fide proforma bearing the Delhi Police logo and containing questions pertaining to the physical appearance of Rahul, who is currently not in the country.



PHOTO: AFP

Pope hints at 'brief' papacy

BBC ONLINE

Pope Francis has suggested he may resign his papacy like his predecessor, rather than remain at the Vatican for life.

The pontiff made the comments during an interview with Mexican television, marking the second anniversary of his election.

"I have the feeling that my pontificate will be brief. Four or five years; I do not know, even two or three," he said.

He praised Pope Benedict's decision to step aside in 2013 as "courageous".

"Benedict should not be considered an exception, but an institution. Maybe he will be the only one for a long time, maybe he will not be the only one.

"But an institutional door has been opened," he told the Televisa channel.

Pope Francis has hinted in the past

that he could retire, but said he was opposed to the idea of an age limit for leaders of the Catholic Church.

A papal conclave elected Pope Francis as Benedict XVI's successor on 13 March 2013. He became the first Latin American to lead the Church.



He told Televisa that he "did not mind being Pope", but missed the anonymity associated with life as a priest.

"The only thing I would like is to go out one day, without being recognised, and go to a pizzeria for a pizza."

Iraq poised for final Tikrit assault

AFP, Tikrit

Iraqi forces yesterday plotted ways of flushing out die-hard jihadists from central Tikrit, which one commander predicted would be liberated within three days.

Fighters from the Islamic State group are massively outnumbered and completely boxed in but they are protected by the thousands of bombs they planted across the city.

The broad alliance of fighting forces battling ISIS in the region is keen to minimise casualties on their way to what would be their biggest victory yet against the jihadists.

Karim al-Nuri, a top leader from the Badr militia and the spokesman of the volunteer Popular Mobilisation units, said it would take no more than "72 hours" to liberate Tikrit.

The last ISIS fighters holed up in the city centre were "surrounded from all sides", Nuri said.

Speaking to AFP from the outskirts of Tikrit, near the village of Awja, he said "their number is now 60 to 70".

There was no evidence of intense fighting yesterday, after another day that saw Iraqi forces strike ISIS from above -- with artillery, jets and gunships -- but make little headway on the ground.

Army troops, police units, Popular Mobilisation units, Shia militia groups as well as Sunni fighters eager to retake their own city launched a huge assault nearly two weeks ago.

They first cleared outlying areas in Salaheddin province, of which Tikrit is the capital, and broke the city's defences on Wednesday.

Tikrit is the hometown of former president Saddam Hussein, the remnants of whose Baath party collaborated with ISIS militants when they swept across Iraq's Sunni heartland nine months ago.

Military coordination was improved, the cooperation of some Sunni tribesmen was secured and Iran is said to have played a key role in the operation's planning and execution.

The outcome of the battle of Tikrit, seen by commanders as a key stepping stone on the way to reconquering ISIS' northern hub of Mosul, seems in little doubt but there is more at stake for the government than just territorial gain.

Woman lies dying as Kolkatans take photos

TNN, Kolkata

A 28-year-old woman lay dying on AJC Bose Road as hundreds streamed past, unconcerned, on Friday morning. Afsa Khatoun, a mother of four, was run over by a speeding school bus and then left unattended for 25 minutes in one of the busiest localities of Kolkata.

CCTV footage shows that many people took cellphone photographs of her and walked away. By the time word got to her family and she was taken to hospital, she was beyond help. Had someone reached out to help her, Afsa may have survived, says her family.

She dropped off her daughters Haasha and Aksha at Pratt Memorial School and was returning home when an "over-speeding" private school bus ran her over while trying to overtake a public bus from the wrong lane on the flank linking Mullickbazar to Moulali.

She lay bleeding on the road in front of St John's Church at AJC Bose Road-Ripon Street crossing for about 25 minutes in rush hour. What makes it even more shocking is, people went about normally all around her.

Yet, no one stopped to help an injured woman.